

Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson to represent Iceland at the Venice Biennale in 2011

The Spanish-Icelandic artist duo **Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson** have been chosen to exhibit on Iceland's behalf at the 54th **International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia 2011**.

Their work is characterized by their at once attentive and critical, analytical and emotional gaze and their interest in identifying the many questions that the present raises. The trans-cultural tendency in today's world and the complex relationships that spring from it is one of the artist's main concerns.

Castro, born 1969 in Madrid, and Ólafsson, born 1973 in Reykjavík – based in Rotterdam and Berlin and aptly referred to as “citizens of the world” – met in the Netherlands in 1997 and have been collaborating since. From the outset, their work caught attention in the Netherlands and in Iceland, and soon internationally, earning them in 2009 the third prize of the prestigious Dutch art award Prix de Rome, for their video *Lobbyists*. Building up a strong body of work using a variety of media, they have developed a conceptual approach with a sense of play, transgression, and inventiveness, often based on intense research into a given subject area.

“Sensitive to the context and to its changes, to the tension and contradictions that pervade a present undergoing perennial redefinition, Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson see art as a way of stimulating and gathering accounts that will allow us to understand places, their character and the lives around us”, as Gabi Scardi, writer and curator at Maxxi Contemporary Art Museum in Rome, put it in a recent article. Thus direct immersion in reality lies at the root of Castro and Ólafsson's art practice. In the striking audio installation *Chapter3: The Noise of Money*, exhibited in Museum ASÍ at the Reykjavik Art Festival 2005, they explored watershed changes Icelandic society was undergoing due to the country's borders opening up to global (financial) markets and consequent migration. Juxtaposing a sound recording from the loud halls of the country's largest fish processing plant – sounding from speakers through all of the museum, from basement to terrace, including kitchen and toilets – with intimate personal narratives of elderly people and immigrants in Iceland – played out in headphones hanging from trees in the museum's surrounding garden– creating an intense and challengingly layered experience.

In 2007 the Málaga Contemporary Art Centre presented an overview of their work with an accompanying catalogue in which the director of CAC Málaga, Fernando Francés, wrote: “With their works, the artists attempt to take the spectator to new realms of reflection and to question truths that are generally accepted as absolute without reasonable doubts ever being raised as to their veracity. Immigration, seasonal employment, cultural differences, the world of work and globalization are [at] the basis of the work of this duo of artists [...] that aims to reflect the world today in all its brilliance and its darkness.”

Following their impressive (musical) video work *Caregivers* at Manifesta 7 in 2008, they opened a solo show at the Reykjavík Art Museum entitled *Everybody is doing what they can*. For this exhibition, the artists used the museum space as both a production and presentation site, creating a growing and mesmerizing installation with screens and projections, with video portraits of people from all layers of the social strata, recorded throughout the exhibition, using color lighting, smoke machines, stroboscopes, bed sheets, confetti and other elements, challenging and subverting the idea of a fixed image, or neutral interview. The museum became a space for meditation and contestation.

Castro and Ólafsson tend to work *in situ*, focusing on finding the stories and the social situations they present in the area where they are to exhibit. They collaborate with CEOs and ministers, as well as with the homeless, with activists, lobbyists or fortune tellers and their “moving perspective” takes them to places such as the streets of Istanbul, the EU offices and the catacombs of Naples. They use white cube museum and gallery spaces, as well as radio, newspapers, TV or the public space as platforms for their works to bridge and infiltrate different contexts, refocusing the social and political sphere.

“With Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, the Icelandic pavilion in Venice in 2011 will feature an artist duo that has built an impressive roster of international exhibitions and an engaging individual practice that stands out in today’s art world”, says Christian Schoen, director of the Center for Icelandic Art and Icelandic commissioner for the Biennale 2007 and 2009. “I am extremely excited to follow their trans-cultural approach towards an Icelandic presentation at the Venice Biennale 2011. They are worthy representatives of the contemporary art scene in Iceland, cutting-edge contemporary artists with a significant socio-critical approach.”

Icelandic artists were first presented at the Venice Biennale in 1960. Most recently, Iceland was represented in 2009 by Ragnar Kjartansson, in 2007 by Steingrímur Eyfjörð, in 2005 by Gabriela Friðriksdóttir, in 2003 by Rúrí and in 2001 by Finnbogi Pétursson – all of them artists who exhibit internationally and have built a strong reputation in and outside Iceland. Until 2005, the Icelandic artists most often exhibited in a small pavilion designed in 1956 by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto in the Giardini di Castelli exhibition gardens. In 2007 and 2009, however, the exhibitions were mounted in the Palazzo Michiel dal Brusà on the Canale Grande, reflecting the expansion of the Biennale in recent years as more and more exhibitions are held outside the gardens originally reserved for the event. The location of Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson’s exhibition has yet to be announced. (For more information on the history of Iceland’s participation in the Biennale, see www.cia.is/venice/history.htm)

The choice of an Icelandic artist for the Biennale is in the hands of a committee that this time included Christian Schoen, Director of the Center for Icelandic Art, Halldór Björn Runólfsson, Director of the National Gallery of Iceland, and the artist Rúrí, who herself exhibited in Venice on Iceland’s behalf in 2003. Two further consultants were brought in to assist in the deliberations: Gunnar J. Arnarson, art critic and lecturer at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts, and Birta Guðjónsdóttir, artist, curator and Chairman of The Living Art Museum. The project is overseen by the Center for Icelandic Art, which in turn is funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

For press downloads and further information, please visit www.cia.is/venice or contact info@cia.is.